

Regional Possibilities

Western Maine Education Collaborative Student-Centered Learning Implementation Case Study

The Western Maine Education Collaborative (WMEC) is a non-profit, regional educational cooperative comprising – in the 2012-2013 school year – 11 school districts. These districts are:

- *Lisbon School Department*
- *AOS 97 (Winthrop/Fayette)*
- *RSU 4 (Litchfield)*
- *RSU 9 (Farmington)*
- *RSU 10 (Dixfield/Mexico/Buckfield)*
- *RSU 38 (Maranacook)*
- *RSU 44 (Bethel)*
- *RSU 58 (Kingfield)*
- *RSU 73 (Jay/Livermore Falls)*
- *RSU 74 (N. Anson)*
- *RSU 78 (Rangeley)*

Geographically vast, the WMEC covers an area of approximately 7,200 square miles. The distance between its furthest points, Lisbon and Rangeley, is nearly 95 miles. The Collaborative is bisected by route 2, but at one point extends south of the turnpike, and at another point approaches the White Mountains and the unorganized territories. While they are scattered and geographically disparate, these districts share both strengths and challenges that emerge from their rural situation. 14,000 students are represented in the Collaborative, in 11 districts.

Formed in 2005 as one way to help these rural districts cope with ongoing and worsening budget issues, the WMEC has since developed into an organization that – beyond arranging bulk purchases and facilitating the logistics of professional

development – has become the venue for discussions of the educational vision of the region. After years of working on a number of collaborative initiatives, the WMEC formally entered into the realm of proficiency-based/learner-centered systems in 2012. The decision to make the shift happened suddenly, but significant work led up to it. Two districts in the WMEC had already committed to customized learning and had joined the Maine Cohort for Customize Learning (MCCL). The others had been hearing about proficiency-based/learner-centered systems through meetings with DOE officials as well as discussion with the Education Commissioner, and the release of the Education Evolving strategic plan. The established structures and credibility of the WMEC allowed member schools to move forward quickly. The nautical analogy says that it's easier to turn a small ship than a large one. In this case, 11 small, district-sized ships seem to be turning ably.

This case study is an exploration of this turn toward proficiency-based/learner-centered education, which, in the region, they refer to as “customized learning.” For this case study, over 20 educators were interviewed in September and October 2012. The intended audience of the case study is the community of educators and policy-makers exploring implementation of proficiency-based/learner-centered systems and practices in their own school districts.

Collaboration in Farmington

On Dec. 13, 2012, at the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF), 150 educators gathered for the fourth day of a series of workshops with Bea McGarvey, co-author of *Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning* (2011). These educators came in teams (ranging in size from three to 25 educators), representing all 11 districts of the Western Maine Education Collaborative and UMF. There was speculation around the room that this may be the largest gathering of educators working on customized learning ever. Certainly, it's the largest such extant work group. These educators didn't simply come from their far-flung districts to UMF to learn together for a few days, after which they would scatter back into the woods. These educators had worked for six years to establish a learning relationship with one another.

Prior to the larger gathering, before breakfast, 20 superintendents and district curriculum leaders sat with the WMEC's "System Change Partner," Judy Enright at a "Cracker Jack" session to discuss the *messaging* of proficiency-based/learner-centered change. How do you communicate this change to students, faculty, staff, administration, parents and community members? Not just, "What words do you use?" But *when* do you communicate? (Early) How often? (As often as possible) What structures? Who do you talk to first? What difficulties have you encountered? And suddenly the meeting turned into a conversation in which the leadership of these 11 districts shared its collective wisdom and experience, their questions as well as some answers. Comparing the work of this early district leaders' session with the later

teachers' session, it was interesting to note that systems' change involved different challenges at the different levels of the organization, but all needed to be addressed.

At the end of the Cracker Jack session, it was announced that Commissioner Stephen Bowen had arrived, unannounced. As it happened, a film crew from the Department of Education's Center for Best Practice was on hand, doing interviews with workshop participants, and they quickly repurposed to capture the Commissioner's remarks. Those remarks – a combination of gratitude for the service of the educators and a challenge to stay the course – culminated in the Commissioner quoting a colleague on the importance and potential of the work being done: *This is the most exciting time to be in education for a hundred years*. Two minutes later, when Bea McGarvey stepped up, the educators of the WMEC were more ready to participate than usual.

The Founding of the WMEC

In 2004-05, the 17 members of the Western Maine Superintendent's Association had conversations on budget difficulties and the possibility of coming together to ameliorate costs through bulk purchasing, sharing staff, and other logistically focused efforts. Ultimately, 11 of the 17 districts decided that it made sense to form a collaborative.

"There were dwindling resources," said Superintendent James Hodgkin (RSU 4). "People needed to find ways to save money. That was certainly a motivating factor initially, looking at services." Hodgkin and the superintendents around him – Tom Ward from Dixfield, Dave Murphy in Bethel, to name two – had immediately begun to connect "and talk about sharing resources. Is there a way we can bid together ... [or] different ways to save money?" The iconic bulk purchases everyone was thinking about at the time were heating oil and paper products – copier contracts – but the vision of the group evolved over time. Tom Ward (RSU 10), remembers, "We came together and said, 'The time is right for us to form a collaborative and just see in what ways can we save money.' And I think we originally did it to see particularly [if we could save on] number two heating oil and diesel fuel. It evolved from there to technology, and then strongly into staff development. We really found our niche as a collaborative when we started sharing the cost of staff development and the various initiatives involving training people. That's where we found our real value."

Though not present at the birth, WMEC Director Mona Baker was brought in early to nurture the organization when the superintendents realized "none of us have the time to facilitate this." Baker had worked for nearly 20 years in the Maine Department of Education in a variety of capacities, including special education program review and as a regional representative. Before that, she had been a speech therapist, and a special education teacher. Two months after retiring from the Maine DOE, the WMEC came knocking on Baker's door. According to Baker, "They said, 'We're starting this organization and it's a nonprofit and we needed an executive director and we think that

you would be a good match. Would you be interested? And, oh by the way, it's part time.' All of which was perfect for me.” There are a few points of unanimity among the participants of this study; among them is the value of Baker to the organization, especially in those early years.

According to Ward, mirroring comments made by many others, “One of the best things we did was hiring Mona Baker as the part-time facilitator and part-time director. Like anything else it all depends on the person that you put into that position whether or not you sink or swim – and she certainly helped us to swim....She managed to keep us afloat for a minimal cost to each of the districts in the early years. Then it really paid off.”

In an early document entitled *Shining a Light on the WMEC* (2006, see resources), the needs for and the benefits of the “shared services” approach were enumerated. Under *Local/Regional Pressures* the following were listed:

- Declining Enrollments (2% this past year)
- Laws/Legislation/Rules
 - EPS
 - Regionalization Legislation
- Ballooning Medicaid/Insurance Costs (41.5% over the past five years)
- Other
 - Fuel: Transportation and Heating (Bloomberg projects 27% for 2007-08)

As benefits of the collaborative approach, the following were listed.

1. Save Money
2. Gain Economy of Scale
3. Standardize Processes
4. Attract More Highly Qualified Staff
5. Retain Local Control and Achieve Scale
6. Flatten out Peaks and Troughs
7. Less Political Opposition

Since the first list was made before the fiscal collapse of 2008, the pressures that led to the founding of the WMEC have only increased. But upon comparing the two lists it becomes apparent that, though all of the stated reasons given for needing the organization revolve around cost (even the *Laws/Legislation/Rules* item focuses on

EPS, i.e., Essential Programs and Services), only three of the seven benefits are directly focused on cost. Though the impetus – and public argument – for the organization had been about *cost savings*, from the beginning the WMEC focused heavily on *adding value* to the efforts of the districts.

Though joint purchasing did work in some instances, it became apparent early on that there were barriers to the districts joining together in such a way. For one thing, according to Business Manager Kris Pottle (RSU 9), the larger districts in the WMEC – for example, RSU 10 and RSU 9 – didn't actually stand to gain much from bulk purchasing. They were already large enough to work with economies of scale. Often, they were willing to join with smaller districts so that those partners could garner savings, but, clearly, this was not the wellspring that they had hoped to see. Also, despite the work of bringing the cultures of the districts into alignment, there were many areas in which the partners simply did things differently. For example, said Pottle, bulk technology buys were seldom possible, especially prior to the expansion of MLTI laptops beyond the seventh and eighth grades. "What we [found]," she said, "was that a lot of schools had their unique supplies and technology. Before the Apple laptop became prominent in Maine, some schools preferred Dell; some schools preferred Apple. Some were going strictly with workstations; laptops were just beginning. So when looking at technology where the biggest money was going everyone had their own direction."

The Structure of the Organization

The formal structure of the WMEC was established early. Member districts felt there was a need for formality because grants were being sought, and dues were being paid. There was "a lot of exchange of money." The formal structure added to the organization's credibility. As it exists today, the organization is a 501(c)3, non-profit. Its board of directors comprises the superintendents of each member district. In all decisions, each district gets one vote cast by the superintendent. When the organization decides to pursue a project – referred to as an "initiative" – then that initiative gets its own budget line, and, if appropriate, an advisory committee is empaneled.

The early steps involved establishing expectations of a level of clarity, trust, and professionalism between districts. These expectations have been essential to the success of the WMEC. "We established by-laws," Baker said, "inter-local agreements; the organization's commitment to meeting the needs of the individual districts while simultaneously meeting the needs of the collective organization. Districts can opt in and opt out of the organization annually, or [in or out of] any initiative at any time. Being fluid that way has allowed districts to make choices that work for them at that moment in time. As things emerge or change, they may opt in, they may opt out. That has worked for the districts."

The director's role has been to facilitate the decisions made by the board of directors and to tend to the organization itself. This includes making the connections required to enact the decisions of the board, communicating about the activities of the collaborative, seeking resources for the collaborative's work, bringing together members of the various districts to make sure the conversations that need to happen do happen, and much else. In the beginning days, a lot of energy needed to be spent on organizational issues. Just bringing the organization into existence required an infusion of money that was beyond the member districts. The board president approached the Maine DOE during that first year and received a one-time grant to focus on WMEC foundational issues. "It's easier to find money when you're doing actual programming," Baker said. "Everybody wants to fund the flashy fun stuff, which feels good, and is good. But the foundational work is harder to find funds for."

Vision setting was another early piece. Before Baker joined the organization, the conversations among superintendents hadn't been entirely about bulk purchases and heating oil. A vision was implied by these early conversations. "My understanding," said Baker, "is [the superintendents] spent a lot of time thinking about what their core beliefs were, and what they wanted to come together to do. It was in part cost savings, but when I came on it was pretty easy for me to listen and identify what their focus was: improve student performance through more effective and efficient use of human, fiscal and technological resources. This became our mission, and continues to be." But more work was needed. First of all, getting to the point of a clearly stated vision took significant work. Secondly, how would such a vision be enacted? What were the changes one would see? The criteria for the organization's success? This was heavy lifting from a systems/organizational perspective.

"That was not easy," said Baker of this visioning period. "I did a lot of the research to put it together. We call it a Futures Plan. It's not as formal or as finite as a strategic plan, but for all intents of purposes, that's what it is. I spent a lot of time interviewing all of the districts, all of the superintendents, and some of their admin teams individually and then collectively. Then I...put together a draft for [the WMEC] to start from. This was important because it really has provided us the structure to organize not only how we think about choices that we make, and how we spend our resources and our time and energies, etc. It has also been an organizer for us to reflect each year on what we have accomplished." This sort of reflection – continual organizational maintenance and focus – has been integral to WMEC's success for the past seven years.

The last of the important opening steps was a cultural one, establishing trust between the districts. Maine's local control structure can at times develop into a local exceptionalism culture. As Baker said, "There is competition on the football field. There is competition from the real estate agents. These pit one district against the other and how they talk about things." Add in local rivalries, and just generalized local pride, and the cultural barriers to forming a collaborative identity become apparent. Baker realized that it was necessary to come to a point where administrators from different districts could encompass each other in the word, "we" – that they had shared goals,

aspirations, and challenges. “We were very purposeful about [addressing] that and actually spent time at board meetings engaged in conversations, readings, reflections, activities to look at that. And after about the second or third year, at our annual meeting when we reviewed all of the actions and activities during the year, the group said, ‘OK, we get it; we’re there. We understand it as part of our core being now, we recognize that.’ And that came because we were purposeful about it.”

Initiatives

The WMEC has shepherded a number of initiatives since its founding. Some are as simple as sharing a music teacher between districts so that a full time teacher could be hired – increasing the quality of the applicant pool for that position. A few match the initial vision of cost-savings from pooling resources. The purchase of library automation software was an example of the classic function of a regional collective. “We had one district that was looking to upgrade,” said Baker. “The tech director said, ‘We’re looking at this [particular software.] Do you know of any other districts that are doing it? It’s pretty expensive.’ Long story short: the tech directors and the librarians came together. And very quickly we came up with a very clear list of non-negotiables that needed to happen in a library automation software system. We wrote our own RFP. We took in vendors. They did presentations. We chose one. All of the districts then purchased the program, and they were able to purchase the components that worked for them, in a timeline that worked for them. Some of them spread it out over three years. Some of them did it right away. We were able to negotiate sharing – saving 50 percent off of the license for every district. We saved 70 or 80 percent on the cost of professional development because we brought everybody together to do that.” With this relationship established, the WMEC was able in the following year to negotiate offering the same 50% license savings to local public libraries in all WMEC member communities.

Using a PLATO software purchase as another example. Superintendent Ken Colville said, “I would describe the process of WMEC as organic. For example, we utilize the PLATO software for alternative education and for supplemental and for our adult education, delivery of adult basic education towards high school diploma. Mona knew that we did this, and that others did....She generated an invitation for people to have a discussion about whether we could share across districts and utilize that sharing to create an economy of scale purchase from the vendor. Those districts who were interested in participating had a further discussion, along with the vendor. The director simply acted as the facilitating catalyst for the discussions. The districts that chose to participate negotiated the final agreement, in that case with the vendor, and received the joint purchasing.”

This tends to be the way initiatives are entered into in the WMEC: “organically.” One member district evinces a need or interest and brings it to Baker or the larger group. *Is anyone else interested in pursuing this?* A larger group means not only cost savings,

but also a larger pool of talented collaborators to work with. Baker will research specifics and facilitate further conversations. At some point, the idea will either be dropped or kept local, or it will be adopted as an initiative of the WMEC. Baker will take on the task of looking at funding options. The initiative will receive its own budget line, and a steering committee will be formed. As the initiative proceeds, it will be regularly evaluated for improvement. Examples of WMEC initiatives follow.

- ***Math Academies:***

In the summer of 2010, the WMEC created a K-5 Math Academy to address the needs of elementary teachers working with the Common Core math standards. In the first year, 100 educators participated. Teacher leaders from within the WMEC gave instruction in math concepts, teaching strategies, and leadership. In the second year, the academies were expanded. The first week was for teachers participating for the first time. The second week was for returning teachers entering into a second year to deepen understanding and skills. This was especially valuable for smaller, isolated districts, such as RSU 78 (Rangeley, et al.), in which the only schools are K-5, and each teacher is the only teacher of his or her grade.

- ***Principals Network:***

In 2011-12, administrators in the WMEC felt a need for professional development and a work group around the question of professional staff evaluation. According to Principal Carol Fritz (Maranacook Middle School), “WMEC doesn’t recommend policy or write policy,” but principals needed a venue within which they could review, research, and discuss evaluation systems. At one point speakers were brought in from education law firm Drummond & Woodson. The group was useful, according to participants, but stalled when new legislation related to teacher evaluation came out of the Maine State Legislature (LD 1858) forced the group to pause. In 2012-13, the group took up its work again.

- ***Virtual High School:***

The WMEC has acted as the agent for the region, purchasing Virtual High School licenses in bulk and then managing their distribution among the districts. This is in many ways simply a bulk-purchasing situation, but that understates the importance of Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) and Multiple Pathways. The truly isolated districts would find it very difficult to provide this opportunity to students apart from the collaborative.

- ***Business Managers:***

In a more unusual initiative, the business managers/finance directors of the participating districts have joined together to serve as a resource for each other. According to Business Manager Kris Pottle (RSU 9), “Business people

wear a lot of hats and don't meet with others; don't get the feedback; don't have that contact. And in some of the smaller districts, [business people] could be the superintendent's secretary, or the payroll person doing all of the financial things. So we started thinking [about getting] together and [talking] about things we have in common, [for example] frustrations with different agencies such as the Maine State Retirement System." Beyond this, though, the business managers have joined together to collaborate on heavy-use documents throughout the WMEC. An example of this would be documents relating to the induction of a new employee into the system – "We don't have an HR department." – or leave of absence forms. This is an ongoing project that Pottle hopes will come to electronic fruition, either with Adobe or Google Docs. But even if they get as far as common paper documents, Pottle would be pleased.

- ***Writing IEPs:***

Michael Opuda, special education consultant for Drummond & Woodsum, led a workshop on writing IEPs (Individualized Education Plans, required for all special education students) that were "educationally and legally sound." This has been described by those who participated in it as "the best thing WMEC ever did." After a needs assessment, according to Mona Baker, special education directors realized that some of the most expensive things districts faced relating to special education were legal fees, and preparation for and appearance in court. The workshop was conducted at UMF over three dates, with "homework" assigned between sessions to allow participants to bring back their ideas to colleagues in the home districts and return with feedback. The workshop itself was very like any district- or state-wide workshop, according to Michael Opuda. The fact that the WMEC had hosted and facilitated the event made no difference in the way the workshop conducted. The way in which the WMEC made a difference, according to SPED Director Laureen Olsen (RSU 74 and RSU 58) was that it brought together a large pool of talented special education professionals to collaborate in this work. Also, because they were able to negotiate as a collaborative, the WMEC was able to find outside funding sources. District educators were able to participate in the yearlong series at no cost. According to Olsen, it would have been impossible for most of the participating districts to independently bring this level of professional development to their educators without the WMEC's facilitation.

Partnership and Evolution

The mission and vision of the WMEC balance two levels of purpose. The mission/purpose of the WMEC is “to build a sustainable regional collaborative that meets the needs of the organization while also meeting the needs of individual members.” This mission is nested within the larger scope of a vision, describing, if you will, the purpose of the purpose. “The WMEC *Vision* for the next three to five years is to: Improve student performance by working together to ensure effective and efficient use of resources (human, fiscal, technological, etc.).” Each of these, mission and vision, is a filter for decisions made by the organization and, increasingly, its districts. Looking at the two in tandem, it is clear that the strengthening of the structure of the WMEC has not been just supportive or incidental to the strengthening of the content of its work, but integral to it. In other words, form hasn’t followed function, nor function form, in the WMEC; both have been fundamentally and essentially connected. Over the past three years, Baker and the board have continued tending the organization. This can be seen in a number of ways.

In October 2010, the WMEC held a “WMEC Direction and Calibration Event” at UMF. The event was facilitated by Judy Enright, an organizational and systems consultant, and followed the model of *World Café*, a system of protocols that allow for “conversational leadership.” The event, taken up three years after the WMEC’s founding, sought to re-engage membership in the collaborative, clarify the understanding of the evolving role of the WMEC, and generate fresh ideas or directions for the future of the WMEC. The importance of the event was not just in the specific ideas generated – e.g., a principals’ network, grant exploration – but in the very fact that the organization came together to intentionally fine-tune itself. The WMEC examined its mission, evaluated its own performance according to that mission, and set action steps to improve its performance.

An important part of the WMEC’s evolution has been its relationship with UMF, which sits within the boundaries of RSU 9 and has a long history with the districts of the region. UMF is well regarded for its teacher preparation program, and very often its student-teachers are placed in local schools of the western region. Furthermore, the UMF Education Department has a mission of supporting the learning of teachers after their initial training. It is, as described by participants, a natural partnership. In the past this partnership has led to the WMEC hosting events at nominal costs and the designing of graduate coursework to meet specific needs of WMEC teachers. But information and resources move both ways in this partnership.

Pamela Wilson is a UMF Director of Educational Outreach who sits as a nonvoting member on the board of the WMEC. She affirms that as much as she wants UMF to be a resource for the WMEC – their “clients” – the teaching program benefits from the partnership. The university provides a structure for deep professional development, a level of reliable quality control, and can certify graduate credits. It is a locus of talent for instructing practitioners. By sitting on the board of the WMEC, Wilson and her

colleagues at UMF gain access to key information – “What’s going on in the field?” – of which they may not otherwise have an authentic view. Wilson cites the WMEC’s work on the revisions to Maine’s Chapter 33 (the recently enacted restraint and seclusion laws) as one fairly technical area in which the partnership with the collaborative has contributed to a change in the way teachers-in-training are prepared.

Situational factors have shaped events at the WMEC, also, but they serve to illuminate the way in which the organization’s flexibility has proven to be a strength. The 2008 consolidation movement in Maine, in which 46 new districts were created in one year, engendered a level of uncertainty that caused some member districts to withdraw temporarily from the WMEC. These events were, according to Baker, “distractors.” Districts essentially didn’t know “which sandbox they were going to end up in. They wanted to continue the work, but they could only commit to what I called smaller safe [initiatives] like specific professional development pieces, [such as] joining together to do an NWEA training. They couldn’t make commitments to long-term initiatives because they didn’t know which ‘sandbox’ they were going to be in.”

One final way in which the organization has evolved is by regularly reporting and framing its accomplishments. For an organization to be in a position of strength – a position in which it is able to respond to circumstance – the members of the organization and those who work with the organization must have faith in that organization through regular newsletters (see resources), the WMEC website, discussions with the press, or specific notices. When Commissioner Stephen Bowen released the Maine DOE’s strategic plan, *Education Evolving*, in February 2012, Baker wrote the Commissioner a letter on behalf of the WMEC Board of Directors and herself providing feedback about the plan and included an extensive document comparing the tenets of the strategic plan side-by-side with the achievements of the WMEC. For each of the strategic plan’s goals, the letter was able to cite a WMEC initiative or activity already in place supporting that goal.

Thus, Baker again presented the case for the WMEC as an effective member of the educational community of the state. It also gave her another opportunity to check on the performance of the WMEC. Writing the letter, she said, “gave us a way to kind of review what we were doing and also overlay it with what our understandings of what the plan was trying to accomplish.” In this way, all of the evolving aspects of the WMEC – the recalibration, partnerships with other institutions, and writing about the WMEC’s achievements – foster some level of formative self-evaluation and continuous improvement for the WMEC.

Western Maine Customized Learning

The organizational strength of the WMEC – its flexibility, its credibility, the trust it had garnered in its member districts – allowed Baker to act quickly when presented with an opportunity to engage with proficiency-based/learner-centered education. Asked to put a date on it, Baker allowed that it was only in January 2012 that the collaborative committed to this path. The apparent suddenness, she said, “has to do with being just in time. [The WMEC] is adaptable to what's on the radar. It was like the perfect storm.”

Conditions in the region were ripe, but unevenly so. Though there had been talk of customized learning and student-centered practice in the districts of the collaborative, the knowledge and readiness levels of the districts reflected the variability one would find in any set of districts in the state. Some had barely heard of it. Some were only just finishing the copies of Bea McGarvey and Chuck Schwahn’s *Inevitable* and Tony Wagners’ *The Global Achievement Gap*, which the state had sent to them. Some were intrigued and “thinking in that direction” and pondering how to begin moving their districts. They were encouraged by the presentations given by Maine DOE officials during a tour of school districts. Other districts – specifically RSU 4 and 10 – had firmly committed their districts to the point that they had joined the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning, a group of school districts from throughout the state helping each other make the journey to proficiency-based/learner-centered practice.

Superintendent Jim Hodgkin (RSU 4) was discussing customized learning with the WMEC board. Simultaneously, word was spreading about work that Bea McGarvey and the MCCL were planning at Bowdoin College in the summer of 2012. “And what we were getting through the MCCL conversations that Jim Hodgkin was coming back and sharing with us was that they were looking at [having] a hundred people [at Bowdoin], about 10 people per district. I said, ‘Time out, that's for the whole state? We're 11 districts.’”

That prompted the board to consider exactly what level of commitment they wanted to make toward customized learning. “How do we really build momentum in a critical mass and energy if we can only do bits and pieces?” asked Baker. She contacted McGarvey by email and said, “If I could pull together districts that were interested in doing mass customized learning work within WMEC, would you be willing to replicate what you're doing [at Bowdoin] just for us?” At the same time, she sent a message to all of the WMEC districts and said, “This is what we're thinking. Do you have any interest in potentially being at the table? This will unfold as we go, but I just need to know are you at least at the level of, ‘*Yeah, I want to know more, and I'll be at the table.*’” Within 36 to 48 hours (“I’m not exaggerating”), she had a response from McGarvey, agreeing to replicate her work in a series of four workshop days conducted between the spring and fall of 2012. Baker just as quickly received responses from 11 out of 11 of the WMEC districts and UMF saying, “Absolutely. They were in.” Dates were identified that all parties could agree to, and space was found at the University. She also contacted the Maine DOE to explain what she was planning. She was aware that the date they had

picked might conflict with the customary date of the Education Commissioner's annual conference. It did. The Commissioner changed the date of his conference.

Having threaded the many needles required to make this event happen on such short notice, Baker, the Board and the WMCL steering committee then addressed the issue of cost. The professional development "was not inexpensive." Baker went to the Department, hoping that there might be support for so many districts enacting this aspect of the Department's own strategic plan. Unfortunately, that was not the case. The group beat the bushes. Again, "perfect storm" conditions seemed to be in operation. Superintendent Mike Cormier (RSU 9) contacted local businesses and received a significant donation from a local businessman and a bank. Several large and small grant applications were written and submitted by various members of the initiative's steering committee. Four small grants were received, as well as a larger grant from the Bingham Betterment Fund. About this last grant, Baker said, "The Betterment Fund review committee contacted me with clarifying questions the day before they were to review the application. In discussing the work and regional commitment to thinking about this as a systems change initiative – requiring a three- to five-year focus – the review committee member and I talked at length about the power of the systems change partner and the role this support could play. The reviewer strongly supported the systems change focus and took a recommendation to the committee that they support WMEC at a higher level than requested with significant support for the first year and smaller awards for years two and three. The Committee approved the amended request.

In the end, each of the 11 districts would pay \$1,000 for the year's work. Between the grants, donations, and district commitments, the WMEC had funds to support customized learning for the current year, the next year, and, partially, a third year. The initiative would be called Western Maine Customized Learning (WMCL).

This included the four workdays with Bea McGarvey – with districts bringing teams of between five and 25 participants – and four days per district working with "Change Partner" Judy Enright. The long ongoing system work within the WMEC was to be mirrored by this work in the WMCL's initiative. Enright had worked with the WMEC prior to this, facilitating the Recalibration Event of October 2010. Her work with the districts was designed to address the transformative nature of the work required. An informational document written by Enright in October 2012 enumerates the ways in which system development and the WMCL work have supported each other. For example, she offered the following services to each WMEC district:

- Development of a Planning Team, Strategic Plan, and On-Going Planning Process
- Development of School/Community Shared Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles for the Education of their Students
- Initial Awareness Sessions for School Staff, Board, and Community

- The Future of Education in Maine Schools
- The Big Picture of Standards-Based Education, Proficiency-Based Assessment, and a Customized Instruction
- The Reasons WHY we are engaging in Standards-Based, Proficiency-Based Assessment, and Customized Instruction
- Development of a School Culture that Supports WMCL Work
- Administrative Team Development around WMCL Work

...Etc.

A number of Superintendents noted that it was essential to have a person in the region tasked with observing and tending to the organizational health and functioning, especially when attempting a shift of this magnitude. And, indeed, in the informational document mentioned above, Enright offered the following observations based on her work around the region, looking at both strengths and needs. She wrote:

What I am Learning in my Role as WMCL's Change Partner

- There is no common language/messaging about what we call “it.” Mass customized learning, personalized learning, standards-based education, proficiency-based learning, and student-centered learning are all part of the many conversations in WMEC schools. For now, I’m calling “it” customized-learning.
- Teachers are yearning for examples of what customized learning looks like in the classroom.
- There are some teachers in the region who are starting to innovate with customized instruction in their classrooms.
- Customized instruction is the “inevitable” result of a standards-based system.
- We *must* educate and involve our communities and we *must do it soon!*

...Etc.

As 2013 approached, the WMEC continued its multi-tiered approach toward customized learning. The initial four-day series ended on December 13. Continued work at all levels has been planned. Judy Enright will work individually with each of the 11 school districts in a manner according to the needs of each. Enright has created a web resource for the WMCL, using Google Sites, called *The WMCL Storage Locker*, to serve as a repository of links and documents for teachers and administration. The WMCL is looking at shoring up its “Big Picture” work – curriculum models, instructional frameworks, messaging – in a series of workdays in June, with six to eight members of

leadership in attendance from each district. In the summer of 2013, teachers of all levels will be able to see what customized learning looks like in the classroom during a three-day workshop, *Math in a Customized Learning World*, which builds on the previous math academies and the work with McGarvey. In the 2013 spring semester, UMF and the WMEC are offering a graduate level course – *Organizational Behavior and Change* – designed specifically (but not exclusively) for WMEC school and district leaders doing WMCL work.

Perhaps it is not an accident that organization/systems work was seen as essential to the Western Maine Customized Learning effort. A keystone of the customized learning effort is the importance of the culture of the district and the structural aspects of the district that support that culture. The same could be said of the WMEC and the WMCL. The effectiveness of the WMEC as an organization was demonstrated in the way structural facets were put into place, thereby creating the conditions in which this educational work could happen. Both promote the ethic of shared leadership – the professional learning community – that creates a “deep bench” of leadership, a wealth of talent at every level to step up as needed. This deep bench – of administrators, teachers, parents, board members, etc. – is necessary for the transformative work promised by proficiency-based/learner-centered practice, and it is necessary for the WMEC, the WMCL, and its districts to continue meeting their mission of “improving student achievement” – for all students.